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SUBJECT: MFA PLEASED WITH SUBSTANCE OF GSD INITIATIVE

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Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

¶1. (S) MFA Assistant Under Secretary Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak told the interagency Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) delegation October 18 that the Dialogue is a serious effort with "substance, not just ideas" to deal with regional security. He sees U.S. proposals to improve bilateral military interoperability as a political breakthrough demonstrating U.S. confidence in Bahrain. Bahrain will participate in the upcoming Proliferation Security Initiative and seeks additional joint military exercises. Iran represents a great challenge for the region - directly, with its nuclear program - and indirectly, by feeding extremism. The U.S. and Gulf countries should have a strategy to win over the majority of Iranian people by showing them the better standard of living on the Arab side of the Gulf and the benefits of strong relations with the U.S. and the West. A nuclear Iran would try to use its military might to support political ambitions. On Lebanon, the U.S. and international community missed an opportunity to use Egyptian and Saudi criticism of the kidnapping operation to generate momentum against Hizballah. The Bahraini Foreign Minister visited Damascus recently to deliver a strong message to President Asad, telling him that Syria must decide which camp it is with. On Iraq, Shaikh Abdul Aziz complimented U.S. commitment, patience, and determination. End Summary.

¶2. (S) The interagency Gulf Security Dialogue delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs John Hillen and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Under Secretary for Coordination and Follow Up Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa October 18 to discuss achieving progress on the six pillars of the Dialogue (reftel). The delegation also met with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Crown Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, and Deputy Prime Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa (septels).

Serious Effort to Advance Dialogue

¶3. (S) Shaikh Abdul Aziz welcomed the GSD delegation to Bahrain, noting that the MFA had coordinated internal interministerial meetings to prepare for the visit. He pledged that the delegation would find that Bahrain was

making a serious effort to move the Dialogue forward in a positive way. He noted that some European countries had recently sent delegations representing their foreign affairs and defense ministries to the GCC countries to talk about regional security. But the U.S. GSD read-ahead paper was the first one to contain substance rather than just general ideas. A/S Hillen said the U.S. side wanted to move ahead quickly on concrete steps. Doing so would send the right signals. The U.S. was engaging with the GCC countries bilaterally, and each country moves at its own pace. In Bahrain, there is a history of real on-the-ground cooperation, enabling us to move quickly. He proposed that to implement the Dialogue, there be two meetings each year to discuss the full range of issues while working groups focusing on individual agenda items meet as necessary.

¶4. (S) On the first point in the paper, Enhanced Defensive Capabilities and Cooperation, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that the GOB sees improving bilateral interoperability as a great breakthrough politically demonstrating U.S. confidence in Bahrain, and the GOB wants to move ahead. Bahrain will participate in the upcoming Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise and the Bahrain Defense Force is interested in doing more exercises. Bahrain needs better air defenses, and maritime security should always be a priority. A/S Hillen stated that the U.S. wants to look at security assistance creatively with Bahrain. The USG reformed its assistance process this year and there are some new possibilities, but the GSD team wants to learn how the region views things. To make quick advances on air defense, there will need to be a more significant front-end investment by the host countries.

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Iran Feeding Extremism

¶5. (S) Regarding Iran, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that Bahrain's challenge is to live next door to a country that causes so many problems - directly, with its nuclear program - and indirectly, by feeding extremism. With its population of 70-80 million, Iran can serve as a breeding ground for extremists who operate in Iraq and other areas. Bahrain has said that it does not want Iran to turn into a "nuclear weapons factory," but the GOB must be cautious before making political decisions on Iran. Bahrain fears Iranian moderates can be radicalized as a result of the international community making wrong decisions.

¶6. (S) A/S Hillen said the U.S. does not see the GSD process as an attempt to provoke Iran. Rather, the goal is to harden our joint defensive capabilities, and therefore exert indirect pressure on Iran to behave responsibly on its nuclear program, terrorism, and proliferation. The U.S. wants to solve the confrontation peacefully, through the UN and IAEA, in addition to steps the U.S. and its allies can take to tie our defense interests together. Doing so would send a signal that Iran's actions and rhetoric are making them less, not more, secure. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said he was pleased Bahrain's input was considered seriously. Bahrain is always on "red alert" with Iran. Ideally, the U.S. and Gulf countries would have a strategy to win over the majority of the people in Iran by showing them the better standard of living on the Arab side of the Gulf and the benefits of strong relations with the U.S. and the West. Once Iranian leaders see a loss of domestic support because of not providing for their people, things can change inside the country. It would be better if the GCC were united in this effort, but Bahrain does not want to wait.

Iranian Meddling in Bahraini Affairs

¶7. (S) Iran, Shaikh Abdul Aziz continued, has a tendency to

get involved in Bahrain's internal affairs. It is acceptable for there to be demonstrations in Bahrain on unemployment, but Iran should not have a hand in politicizing the demonstrations. Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa visited Iran and said publicly that Iranian religious groups influence Bahraini groups, which they should not be doing. The Iranians did not like Shaikh Khalid saying this, but it is true. Bahrain likes its citizens to have opinions but "we won't stand for them (Iran) changing our open system." It would be useful, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said, for the GCC to meet to discuss how to deal with Iran.

¶18. (S) A/S Rodman pointed out that there are contradictions inside Iran. We believe that a majority of Iranians do not like the regime and are not hearing the truth about the nuclear program. They do not know that it is a weapons program that comes with a cost of political and economic isolation. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that even if people knew it was a weapons program, they would dismiss sanctions, claiming it is Iran's sovereign right to have the program. They may ask, why do some countries have nuclear weapons and others do not? A/S Rodman replied that just having nuclear weapons, even without using them, would change the regional political climate. Shaikh Abdul Aziz agreed that Iranians believe that military might supports their political ambitions. He suggested that perhaps the GSD working group on Iran should invite some Iranian think-tank analysts to participate in a discussion.

Arab Criticism of Hizballah

¶19. (S) On Lebanon, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that for the first time ever, Egypt and Saudi Arabia had criticized Hizballah for kidnapping Israeli soldiers. It was a "huge coup" for Arab governments to criticize any group attacking Israelis. The U.S. and international community should have taken advantage of the Egyptian and Saudi positions by using them as a way to generate momentum against Hizballah. Instead, the opposite happened - Israel invaded, and now there is tremendous support for Hizballah.

¶10. (S) A/S Hillen replied that the U.S. recognized the importance of taking advantage of the Egyptian and Saudi positions, but things had changed very quickly during the

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conflict. Now our focus is on building up the authority of the Lebanese government and the Arab countries can assist in this process. Hizballah should not be allowed to operate as a state within a state. A/S Rodman said the Arab world should take note of Syria's role in the crisis. The Syrian government is trying to exert influence over the Siniora government with renewed pressure. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said the Bahraini government is against the Syrian position and is one of the few countries that is doing something about it. Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid visited Damascus recently at King Hamad's instruction to pass President Asad Bahrain's views. The message was, "Whose side is Syria on?" Syria has to make a choice about which camp it is with. Unfortunately, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said, Bashar does not have the character to make bold decisions. "We need to cut loose from countries who don't think like us, and move forward."

Infrastructure, Terrorism, Proliferation

¶11. (S) Turning to the next agenda item, Shaikh Abdul Aziz asked for the USG's views on protecting critical infrastructure. A/S Hillen said the attack on the Abqaiq refinery highlighted the vulnerabilities of infrastructure upon which the world economy depends. The focus is to harden defenses of these types of facilities in addition to conducting a broader risk management analysis looking at

other means to deliver oil and developing alternative energy sources. Shaikh Abdul Aziz agreed this is a very important subject and wondered why so much of the region's oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz while some could be transported by pipeline to the Red Sea.

¶12. (S) A/S Hillen asked about the status of the planned GCC regional counter-terrorism center to be located in Bahrain. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said the effort was initiated by Saudi Arabia, which at the last minute asked Bahrain to host it. Officially, the status of the center is pending. Off-the-record, it is not likely that the center will be located in Bahrain. Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that Bahrain is doing its part internationally to combat terrorism. It recently passed a new counter-terrorism law and anti-money laundering/combating the financing of terror law, and has adopted 11 of the 12 UN counter-terrorism conventions. A/S Hillen stated that it is important that Bahrain and the other GCC countries continue to make practical progress on intelligence-sharing, laws, and monitoring the financial sector and charities.

¶13. (S) On counter-proliferation, Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that Bahrain had joined PSI and would participate in the upcoming exercise. A/S Hillen asked that Bahrain encourage others, including southeast Asian nations, to join PSI. Shaikh Abdul Aziz suggested that the U.S. could propose that those countries follow up with Bahrain on the exercise in the Gulf.

Commitment to Iraq

¶14. (S) Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that regarding Iraq, people admire the commitment, patience, and determination of the United States. Bahrain has a particular interest in Iraq because of its Shia population. He asked for the views of the GSD delegates. A/S Rodman said the President is sticking to his Iraq policy. There will be no U.S. withdrawal until conditions warrant. RADM Moeller said Iraqi security forces and army are becoming more effective and are gaining the respect of fellow citizens. Although Baghdad is violent, other parts of the country are better. Improving police performance is a problem and represents a long term challenge.

¶15. (U) A/S Hillen and A/S Rodman cleared this cable.

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